

XQ-28

The Story of a Gene

Chapters 3&4

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To all the friends and family who encouraged it, to all the great minds that inspired it. But mostly, to Adrian & Anthony, who lived it.

A door. A door opening and is still opening. A door opening and a face. A face close close closer then stars. A white light. A face in my face then above me over me. Something in my throat soft palate like an artist... thick. Phlegm. Swallow but can't swallow. Must have caught a cold. Caught a cold in Belize once in Mack's Bar pretty girl in a flowery skirt not skirt what was the name not the girl the skirt you cunt sarong that's right. Must have caught a cold. That'd make Butcher laugh he's always telling me how I couldn't catch nothing. Blinding place nothing to do but get drunk stoned and laid. Blinding light. Distant thuds on my legs not legs near my legs. Cotton wool head I can hear a tap dripping. Chinese water torture. Voices. There they go arguing again. There's enough arguing in the world. Give it a rest. Always arguing like me and Joan. Joan. How come I don't see you no more? I can see her face in my face her hair in my face her sweat on my skin and my cock inside her. Got it that's where the thud's coming from. Moaning. Joan. Stay with me Joan be my friend we know each other so well don't change don't ever change no Joan don't change don't... Mother? Mother. Smiling. I'm going to be sick swallow it. Taste. Like metal. I'm gonna be sick relax it'll pass. Sniff swallow that smell. So familiar. No don't tell me I'll get it... Piss. Have I wet myself? That smell and warm down there I'm sorry mum. I'm a grown man but I wish... shut up you cunt... I wish... I wish I was a child again. There I've said it. I wish I was a child and I could start again climb back inside and be born again into a new world with no hard edges and so much fuckin pain... I could never forget your smile... my head's all fuzzy and your hand's so cold brushing the cotton wool away. White... rush... white... tap's still dripping forget the fuckin tap... I can hear the sea like the sea but beating fuzzy... I'm coming... white light... wait I've been here before... white rush... white... rush... I recognise it... mother... I'm coming... I'm coming... I'm...

Chapter 3 Cornershop Nightmare

The strangest dream. As I awoke the next morning, I couldn't get it out of my head that I'd had the strangest dream. I lay in the slow moving gloom, feeling the damp that had permeated my flesh in the night coalesce into the dull familiar ache of morning, barely daring to breathe. I thought that maybe I had wet the bed, and the kind of shame that I had last felt as a child flooded in, and for a second I thought I would be sick, but on moving realised that the liquid that trickled off my body was merely sweat from a good night's sleep. I laughed aloud with the ridiculousness of my assumption, and in those short moments of bliss, the greater panegyric of the previous evening echoed around my cranial vault, and I curled myself up into a ball and giggled gleefully at the insanity of my actions.

I would probably have continued to laugh all day, but two things stopped me. The first was the image of the policeman, laying with his face covered in blood and mucous, beached in a pool of piss. But outweighing this, by a degree incalculable to my morning senses, was the fact that, try as I might, I could not recall Martin's face. Every time I pictured his body, his clothes and pose in crisp detail, his face was a blank.

I started to panic. I tried running my mind's eye up the length of him, starting at his feet. Dirty white trainers with a navy flash running parallel to the piss-streaked floor. Light blue turn-ups

with the famous Levi's double seam, washed out vintage denims. My mind hesitated at the crotch which was, naturally, bulging. Black leather belt, two inches wide with a silver metal buckle. Plaid shirt in red, black and white brushed cotton, similarly slightly bulging at the front. Slow pan up to two breast pockets, slower, to reveal shirt open underlining the symmetry, naked hairless chest beneath. Large collar supporting black hair as neck appears. Slower still. Chin. Still chin. I panned up fast in panic and saw a blur where a face should have been. I pulled back to fit his whole body into the frame. Still no face.

I leapt out of bed and ran over to the window, my body naked and shivering. I opened the blinds to see dusk - my God, I must have slept for fourteen-odd hours! Further depressed, I rushed to the bathroom to splash cold water on my face.

As I look in the mirror I'm looking at Martin, features towards me like the first time I saw him, moonlight eclipsing, heart beating wildly, face in the shadows, hair in the wind.

I stared into the mirror that hung above the sink until our features divided, running *our* eyes over the contours until only mine remained. As I did so, the manila walls reflected in the glass glowed violet, so that as soon as I was sure that I could no longer see his face, I had to quickly turn round and reassure myself that someone hadn't broken into my flat during the night and repainted my bathroom, then laughed an uncertain laugh. Was I still dreaming, or had I really lost touch with the world of reality? Manila and damp shouted you're sane. All too sane.

I spun round and stood over the toilet as I felt a wave of nausea pass up my body, and retched bile into the green bowl. My stomach was practically empty anyway, and the effort robbed me of what little energy I had left, so that it was necessary to hold onto the banister as my shaking legs took me upstairs from the basement to the bare hallway. I walked into the kitchen and over to the kettle, pushing in the button to bring it to the boil, shivering but allowing mild feelings of calm to fill the vacuum left by slowly-departing self pity.

As the milky instant coffee warmed the walls of my stomach, I sat in my uncomfortable armchair until I could face the thought of food. The fridge was empty save for some vegetable margarine,

which I spread thinly on the toasted crust which had been the cupboard's sole tenant. It was still two days until dole day, and although I had less than £4 left, I had to spend it on some food.

As I dressed, I began to feel a little better, and by the time I pulled on my jacket, raising the collar against the anticipated cold, I was able to smile at the thought that the world I was about to enter was somehow different to the one I had left at my door the previous night.

It was colder than I could have expected. It seemed that winter, realising that it only had a few days of justifiable bitterness left in its soul, was hurling it all in one final death rattle. I pushed my hands deeper into my pockets, and picked my shaky way along the uneven paving stones, casting weak shadows under the sodium street lights. With my head down, I noticed, for what seemed like the first time, that I cast two shadows that moved independently of each other; one stretched out before me, the other snapping at my heels. The closer I came to the bottom of a lamppost, the further the first shadow cast, becoming weaker then disappearing altogether, replaced by a darker one that grew in length the further I got from the light. My knowledge of lighting should have made this a banal observation, but in my present state it struck me as both delightful and profound. I laughed outloud, and the column of steam that issued from my mouth stopped me dead, as I watched in wide-eyed astonishment the tiny glistenings that twinkled in my white breath as I repeatedly breathed in and out.

I don't know how long my epiphany lasted; all I know is that it was the words 'The world is a wonderful place!' that broke its hold and reanimated my footsteps. What I was becoming, and what had enacted this transformation I knew not, but I was convinced that there was something almost indecent about the boyishness that inhabited the gait that took me onward to the cornershop that late winter evening.

Inside the shop, life went on as usual. The old Asian man behind the counter smiled and said his familiar -Hello, long time no smell, that as always made me smile an embarrassed smile. I stared at the rows of tins on the shelves through optimistic eyes, so that their mundanity eluded me; the pathways that had

brought them here, from as far away as India, seemed in my present state to be almost magical. I noticed that the tinned lentils were still standing in their box, which the shopkeeper had made into a kind of display by cutting the box in half. On the side of the box, partly obscured by the tins of baked beans stacked beside it, were numbers scrawled in black crayon. As I ran a fingertip over the waxy numerals, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what hand had written them; a brown hand for sure, perhaps sweating from the heat in a Bombay warehouse. And as it wrote this, did its owner likewise wonder where this box was heading? Did they dream, as I now dreamt, that a different life was always coexisting on the other side of the globe, that for a few short seconds converged with their own...

-Earth calling customer, come in customer...

My eyes flashed open and I spun round, to see the shopkeeper smiling at me benignly.

-You seem a long way from home, friend.

-I was, I replied, but I'm back now.

-Shall we have a party to celebrate your return? He raised an eyebrow.

-Nice idea, but I don't think it's necessary.

His face contorted.

-Oh you are so reserved. In my country, when someone returns from a distant place, we would feast for a week!

-Sounds great. I'll be lucky to feast for a night on the money I've got.

He laughed, turning his attention to the refrigerator in front of him. I too continued to browse the shelves, our intimacy suddenly gone.

-Terrible business, isn't it, the shopkeeper said as he placed my change in my hand. I looked at him blankly, unsure whether or not he was complaining about a lull in trade.

-The murder. Terrible business. Terrible.

He tapped the evening edition of the newspaper upon which were standing the few provisions I had just bought, and as I placed each one in the blue carrier bag he had just charged me nine pence for, more and more of the headline appeared.

The small loaf of sliced brown bread (95p) obscured the words PC SLAIN, the rough recycled egg box (90p) had covered the words IN TOILET, one pint of milk (60p) and the can of baked beans (65p) conspired to cover MYSTERY. My already shaking hand finally lifted the second pint of milk, under which was hiding a blurred photograph of the smiling cop, whom last I had seen the night before, his face a mass of blood, laying in a pool of piss.

-It makes me wonder what he was doing there, the shopkeeper was saying as my stomach went into spasm and I tried desperately to cling onto consciousness. I looked up at him as he continued.

-You hear the strangest stories about these places... My God are you alright?

I could feel the blood draining from my face as my legs began to convulse, and I could barely manage to nod as I leant for support on the counter.

-Yes... I will be... I'm still a little weak... I've been ill you see...

-Ah, he said, holding my arm, I thought I hadn't seen you lately. Do you need to sit?

-No no I'm fine... I'll go and lie down... I'll be fine once I've eaten something.

I moved to the door, suddenly wanting to be miles away, but he followed me and continued to hold my arm.

-You go home and get a good night's sleep my friend. You look like you need it. Will you be okay to walk?

The concern in his voice, genuine and humane, made me want to vomit with shame. I nodded and pulled open the door, feeling the night on my sweating skin like cold judgment. I mumbled a thank you and staggered off down the street. The last thing I heard was his avuncular voice shouting

-Take care my friend,

and once inside my flat, I was sick for the second time that day.

Chapter 4 Numb

*At night on my bed I sought him whom my soul
loveth. I sought him, but found him not.*

I didn't mean to do it. Forgive me. I didn't mean to do it, and in a way I didn't. It was not my foot that crashed into the cop's groin, but the foot of a stranger whose winged ankles I barely recognised. His disdain was purer and deeper than any I have felt. Hatred coursed through him with a brighter current than flowed along my insulated veins. The smile that passed across his face was broader than any I could muster.

Time has stopped, has ceased to exist. The clock no longer signifies, its face inscrutable to my gaze. As I stare through dehiscent eyes at the ceiling, its undulations mark a lunar landscape under which I weightlessly rotate. I am powerless in its stifling orbit, the air sucked from my lungs leaving a vacuum of paroxysmal pain that nails me to the bed.

Empty and expanding in convulsive flux. My stomach cramps and I double up as waves of blue-black energy grip my arms and raise the covers. I peer down at my body through clouding retinas; invisible talons claw at my entrails. As I run my fingers across the taut reptile skin that covers my belly I can feel their marks. I seem to be drowning but my mouth is as dry as a mirage. The walls scream in at me howl their curses point accusing

disembodied fingers at my prone outline. *He's here come quickly before he flees his pit grab him subdue him with street justice and tear him to pieces.*

If only Martin were here, he would know what to do. Shivering in the darkness, I feel his face in mine; I can smell his skin and breath upon me, chilling my sweat, blowing away doubt. His face hangs in the air, my soul reaches out for instruction, and I see the world through his gun metal eyes.

Hard facts. The headline implied they knew nothing. There is nothing to connect us. I saw no one on my way home, and I have no idea where Martin lives. At the time I thought he was being hard - now I know he refused to tell me where he lived to protect me, to protect himself but to protect me too. One look in my eyes must have told him that I would react in this way if the worst came to the worst. And there was certainly no denying that the worst had come.

And in that instant, I realised I was alone.

There is a school of psychotherapy that says to name a problem is to get ninety percent towards solving it. At this time, Martin was still a long way from being an internalised disorder, but he *was* my problem.

Or, more accurately, *non*-Martin was my problem.

And my mouth opened, and I whispered:

*I must rise now and go about the city, and find him
whom my soul loveth.*

It was dark as I left my flat. The sound of traffic told me it was evening. The cold had not abated, but was of a different, more pernicious quality that chilled me to the bone, my mania doing little to shake off its grasp. My mind was leaping wildly from one extreme of emotion to another, the only constant, my anxiety to reach Martin, dragging me semi-conscious towards Spanner Square. Somehow he must be there. He *must* be.

I turned the corner, and looked up into wrought iron gates slammed shut against a deep gentian sky, closer still and saw they were strung with orange tape, the legend POLICE INCIDENT - KEEP OUT coming sickeningly into focus. I instinctively fell in

behind the shadow of a huge elm, to peer through the fence and into the park.

The squat Victorian toilets that sat like a heavy nucleus in the centre of the park were decked in fluorescent tape. I could pick out the words POLICE REQUEST ANY WITNESSES TO CONTACT US IMMEDIATELY ON before sensing that this place must be being watched, and froze, completely unaware of what to do. The old saying about murderers and scenes of crimes sprang into my head like some brutal truism, and I broke my trance by walking, trying so hard to resist the urge to run away as fast as I could. I walked to the end of the street and left, away from my flat and into the city.

By the time I was a couple of streets away, I knew I was being followed. I could hear his footsteps as they echoed behind me. I tried to speed up without appearing to go faster, little scurries of four steps at a time, but the steps just came closer. There was only one thing for it; to actually give the impression that my purpose for visiting the toilets tonight was nothing more dangerous than sex with a stranger *listen to what you're saying you fool you've got a strange concept of dangerous!* Okay, bad choice of words. Dangerous maybe, but less than murder.

I crossed the street and cut down an alleyway that ran through the centre of a huge tenement of 1930's public housing, long since derelict. As I crossed the border between light and shadow erected by the streetlights behind me, I felt safer, as if passing into a new country that my actions had somehow made me eligible for citizenship within, and I paused in its grace to listen for the footsteps that had been mirroring my own. They stopped. It seemed that I could hear myself shaking, the tiny changes in air pressure around me reflected and magnified by the vault of the passageway. I turned to see the path behind me empty.

I hurried through the shell of houses into a huge courtyard of corrugated iron windows and boarded-up doorways, my steps stumbling on broken concrete. I had always found this place appealing, with its sense of community strangely unaffected by dilapidation, but now it took on the impression of a home. I almost considered trying to break into one of the houses, to hide

there until whatever it was that had a hold of my insides lost interest and moved on to some more worthy victim, but the urge passed and I was soon back in the main street, picking my way towards the subterranean toilets of London Road.

They'd already been there. The iron gates, permanently open for as long as I could remember, were bolted, a heavy chain and padlock reinforcing the message. I resisted the urge to kick them, still gripped by a pervading sense of being watched. Instead I turned and walked back into the city.

On North Road, the toilets had been bricked up and the sign removed. I reached out a tentative hand and found the mortar still wet, its gritty grey porridge sticking to my finger. By tomorrow it will never have been there, I thought; this still wet fragment is the only proof that it was ever alive, ever a doorway to another reality and not a mere brick wall. I wiped the cement off my finger and dropped it into my pocket, but I knew it was a futile gesture. To whom would it prove anything? Of what interest was it to anybody, and why should I be so interested?

The park was darker than velvet, but there was still no mistaking the silhouette of scaffolding that rose above the level of trees over the place where the lavatories had once been. I knew before I got there that they would be gone. It had taken me half an hour to get there, and as I reached the fence that had been erected around the demolition site, I sat down on the cold hard ground, breathing deeply to overcome my nervous exhaustion, feeling the sweat run down my back, feeling trapped, as if the fence I leant against was actually keeping me *in* this sterile, restricted, hateful world, when all I wanted was to be *out there*, in that fifty square feet of freedom. And as I sat, the words of a poem I had once heard God-knows-where appeared before my dilated eyes, as if written on a scroll:

*And priests in black gowns
Were walking their rounds
And binding with briars
My joys and desires*

and below it, in clumsy marker-penned capitals, a graffito I

had seen on a pissoir wall, that seemed to reveal its true meaning:

A PRIEST IS A COP WITH A BIBLE,
A COP IS A PRIEST WITH A GUN.

I must have sat there for hours. When I finally moved, the cold had eaten into me and my buttocks were numb, the bones in my legs aching so much I could hardly walk. I picked my way blindly through the grounds to the road. I had no idea where to go, certainly not back to my flat, where the walls screamed, and the fixtures whispered my guilt.

I somehow found myself, at dawn, by the banks of the river, and looked out over its polluted width, into the gaze of a sky rent asunder by orange, thinking of another's insight into that ever-changing, never-changing murky water, change its only constant, and how I was now part of that change, excluded from the world of order by one single act of transgression.

By the river I sat down, and finally wept, and watched as my tears dripped into the water, the tide dragged them and diffusion displaced them, and within seconds they were *of* the river, nothing of their uniqueness preserved, but amalgamated into the bigger flow taken wherever it meanders. And I knew that I must do the same, subsume myself to tidal pull, anonymise myself, and meander the fuck out of there...

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